Report from the Association for Western State Folklorists Annual Meeting
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Eugene, Oregon

Prepared by Kristin Sullivan, Ph.D., M.A.A.
Director, Center for Washington Cultural Traditions
kristin@humanities.org

Introduction

This report summarizes my experiences at the annual Association for Western State Folklorists (AWSF) meetings held in Eugene, OR, April 19-22, 2017. As a public folklorist new to Washington State—I moved from Maryland in 2016—I was anxious to attend this regionally focused meeting, to interact with my new peers and develop some insight into the world of public folklore in the Western U.S., and particularly the Northwest. The meetings took place less than two months after I stepped into the position of Director of the Center for Washington Cultural Traditions (CWCT), Washington's new folklife and traditional arts program. Though I met a few of the AWSF meeting participants during contracted fieldwork I conducted leading to my new position, I was anxious to interact more with them and meet others. Additionally, though I became Washington's new state folklorist after working as a public folklorist in Maryland, my academic training is in applied and cultural anthropology, so I was also interested in getting a better understanding of the ways in which folkloristics are put into practice generally, and especially in this geographic region.

I attended the meetings from the afternoon of April 20 through the morning of April 22, and will report here on my observations and experiences during that time, especially as they relate to information and examples provided regarding practical

planning and knowledge for public folklorists, discussion of the future of the field, and the observed importance of camaraderie and professional network development.

Background

In its own words, the AWSF is a "loosely organized group of public folklorists in the Western states." The group has met annually since 1981, and each year "develop[s] an agenda based on the interests of the group, with discussion topics presented by those who suggest them and [sessions are] then opened for informal dialog."[1] The AWSF also organizes a professional development workshop each year as part of the meetings, as well as a daylong folklife emersion experience known as The Graze. The latter includes tastings, artist demonstrations, and other activities in-situ, at local workshops and businesses. The annual meetings have historically been funded in part by the Western State Arts Federation and the National Endowment for the Arts, along with a local organization. This year's meeting was organized and funded in part by the Oregon Folklife Network, and registration was waived

Participants in The Graze enjoy a tasting and talk on craft beer at Eugene's Ninkasi Brewing.

[1] Via the Association of Western State Folklorists, online: https://awsf.wordpress.com/about/

thanks to an anonymous donor.

A unique element of this year's meeting is that it coincided with the Western States Folklore Society's (WSFS) annual meeting. The WSFS was founded in 1941 and is today "committed to the study of regional, national, and international folklore in all its aspects."[2] Organizers from both the AWSF and WSFS planned opportunities in their respective schedules for program overlap—including joint receptions and sessions.

Though I do not have statistics for attendance at the WSFS meetings, this year 27 public folklorists (active and retired) attended the AWSF meeting across the entire event, with a portion of these individuals cross-registered at both the AWSF and WSFS meetings.

As I was unable to attend the entirety of the meetings, this report covers only those portions which I was able to experience: portions of The Graze; two receptions and one organized dinner at a local restaurant with house-made craft beer; and sessions dedicated to understanding the future of folklore, to understanding the work of public folklorists, and to examining the potential and future of folklore. Through these experiences I noticed three themes that ran throughout meetings: the desire for, and offering of, professional development opportunities, the importance of camaraderie and building relationships, and concern for the future of folklore.

Professional Development

[2] Via the Western State Folklore Society, online: http://www.westernfolklore.org/About.html

Experiences such as The Graze and interpretation of beer/hop culture at an organized dinner provided excellent practical examples of public folklore experiences, showcasing the work of local artists and other tradition bearers utilizing experiential learning modalities. The Graze this year included a guided neighborhood tour, and demonstrations or talks related to pinball culture, distilling liquor, coffee culture, craft beer, and glass blowing. While good for building camaraderie among participants and getting to know the locale, these opportunities also provided inspiration for public and educational programming. Such inspiration was also present in a session on tribal collaborations, with Shirod Younker (Coquille Tribe) and the Oregon Folklife Network's Lyle Murphy. Mr. Younker's presentation provided information and interpretation regarding Native American art and craft related to canoe and carving practices, including the opportunity to see and put our hands on paddles and boat models he created, and to learn about the different ethnic identifiers incorporated into design. Additionally, however, Mr. Younker described a collaboration with the Oregon College of Art and Craft, wherein he works with Native youth, teaching carving and other traditional art forms. He stated that he and those he teach gain a "connection to others as [they] learn to make something; there is a spiritual connection to the ancestors" created through making traditional objects and practicing traditional design. His description of the program provided inspiration for potential educational programming involving master artists and other tradition bearers—showing the deep importance of carrying on traditional practices.

Practical sessions to aid in professional development were also provided through the AWSF. Besides a panel exploring the professional work of three public folklorists[3], one session I attended was devoted to archiving practices. Nathan Georgitis, Archivist for the University of Oregon's Special Collections, presented archiving strategies employed by the Oregon Folklife Network. Mr. Georgitis provided suggestions and considerations regarding management of data collected and stewarded by public folklorists. Some of his suggestions are as follows:

- Create different file formats for preservation and public access copies of media.[4]
- Consider naming files according to their history, for example: Organization_Program_Date_Creator_File Type_Number_Use.file[5]
- Create a data management plan for your team. This document should at least consider the following: How should data and metadata be managed? Which are acceptable file formats? What are the organization's policies for access and use? What are the organization's plans for long-term storage?
- Create redundant storage for file backup: three copies of data on two different storage devices, and at least one in a remote location (e.g., cloud storage).
- Create a log for contracted and student fieldworkers to ensure data recorded between different individuals is as consistent as possible.

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[3] Beth Dehn (Program Coordinator, Road Scholar), Emma Oravecz (Events Manager, University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communication), and Elaine Vradenburgh (Founder, Windowseat Media)

[4] Recommended files for or text documents: .pdf (preservation and access), photo: .tiff (preservation) and .jpg (access), audio: .wav (preservation) and .mp3 (access), and video: .mov

[5] In practice this might look like CWCT_AP_20171201_KS_Photo_001_acc.jpg for a file created for a photo for public access, created for the Center for Washington Cultural Traditions' Apprenticeship Program by Kristin Sullivan on December 01, 2017.

Additionally, Mr. Georgitis offered suggestions for bigger-picture ideas for the folklorist to consider:

- Take into account the extent to which public use and community involvement must inform the archives, and how they will access materials.
- Create and organize media with an eye toward reciprocity. How will you give back to communities through the archive?
- What will happen to your data after you are gone? Will your data remain part of an organization, be donated to a library, or other?

While many of my interactions and experiences were intellectually stimulating, and will no doubt bear fruit in the future, this session was especially helpful in that it provided something concrete I could implement immediately upon my return. I've already put into practice several of Mr. Georgitis's suggestions with the Center for Washington Cultural Traditions' nascent archive.

Camaraderie and Relationships

Perhaps the most noticeable advantage of attending this conference—and this truly came across more than at larger professional and academic conferences I have attended—was the potential of building relationships. While opportunities such as The Graze were ostensibly put together in

Folklorists dine together during the AWSF meetings.

order to showcase the locale's cultural traditions, the events provided the opportunity for informal conversations around focused topics, many of which continued on during a reception that followed The Graze. Similarly, organizers put together opportunities for attendees to dine together, and in at least one instance, folklife interpretation was provided by organizers.

In general, the small conference size and limited programming led to a great deal of time spent together in shared experiences, in a way reminiscent of a study abroad program or group tour. Through ample opportunities for informal conversation between sessions, state folklorists were able to discuss programming, commiserate about challenges, and brainstorm about solutions to the same. Suggestions were made for collaborations. Fears about the economy and future of the field were discussed. And in general, a real sense of community was created among many. One of the ways in which this became apparent was in the planning session for future meetings. Attendees were invited to actively participate in the planning of the 2018 and 2019 meetings—and even decide whether meetings should be held annually, in conjunction with the WSFS in the future, and other major administrative decisions. As such, relationships were created during the conference, and participants were engaged in the future of the organization and conference.

The Future of Folklore

Over and again at the conference the "future of folklore" came up as a topic of interest, and of deep concern—in one formal joint session between the AWSF and WSFS dedicated to the issue, informally in other sessions, and in several side conversations of

which I was a part. The formal "Future of Folklore" panel was comprised of Kay Turner (President, American Folklore Society), Lilli Tichinin (State Folklorist, New Mexico), Patricia Whereat Phillips (Master Storyteller/Miluk Coos, Linguist), Elena Martinez (Folklorist, City Lore), Guha Shankar (Folklife Specialist, American Folklife Center/Library of Congress), Habib Iddrisu (Assistant Professor of Dance, University of Oregon), and Riki Saltzman (Executive Director, Oregon Folklife Network). Each of these individuals provided their perspective on the current state of folklore as they perceive or practice it, lessons learned from their experiences, and any vision for the future of the field they might have; this was followed by a question-and-answer period. Topics throughout included: concern over whether "folklore/folklorist" is understood or valued by the public and those in other disciplines (consensus seems to be that it is not), the need to understand how to use digital content created for folklore archives, what to do with the folklore of "dangerous folks" (i.e., hate groups—how to document or interpret these without giving a voice to such groups[6]), how to keep communication open between academic and public folklorists, the importance of collaborative programming, and the opportunity folklorists have now to reshape the field moving forward—as Dr. Shankar put it: "The present is haunted by the past, but the present informs the future." As a new state folklorist this session was of particular interest to me, but I came away from it feeling that at least some of the field is stuck in dangerous territory, wherein essentialization and covert racism lead folkloristics.

[6] One suggestion for documenting hate groups without providing additional spotlights for their causes was to work with or provide information to the Southern Poverty Law Center and with museums that address related issues.

The first presenter on the panel was President of the American Folklore Society, Dr. Kay Turner. Dr. Turner presented three areas the field of folklore needs to better address: 1. Diversity among folklorists, 2. The inclusion and recruitment of "young people" in folklore, and 3. Bringing folklore to a larger, or wider, audience. She emphasized the need for new or additional "portals of engagement" (e.g., digital media as well as personal engagement through folklorists' efforts). This was encouraging—to know that leadership in the field is promoting a vision of the future that includes diverse scholars, practitioners, and communities being reached in multiple and meaningful ways. During the question and answer period, however, two attendees voiced their perspectives relative to Dr. Turner's and others' pluralistic and open vision, and their perspectives were concerning.

One member of the audience, who appeared to be a white male, read a question he wrote down: "How do we diversify without losing the essential characteristic of the field?" There was no immediate response, and in fact it took a panelist suggesting, at the end of the session, that we should reframe the questioner's concern about change, so that we see the positive aspects of inclusivity; growth and expansion rather than destruction. There was no further discussion of this question in the session.

Separately, another attendee in the audience suggested: "We are born to be folklorists." She, who appeared to be a white female, took time to relay a Native American legend she learned from a community with whom she worked. In this, a possum went to the realm of the ancestors in order to retrieve the sun for the human realm. The possum held the sun with its tail and successfully brought the sun to humans, but in the process burned his tail. So to, she intimated, folklorists go to great lengths to

"revitalize" and "bring back" traditions. Folklorists, she suggested, feel a "calling" they are born into. There was no response addressing this directly; but at least where I sat, individuals indicated their agreement through nodding heads and quiet statements such as "M-hm, yes."

The subtext of these comments is deeply concerning. There seems to exist in at least some folklore circles a propensity to hold onto a colonialist vision wherein the folklorist is apparently white, and the ultimate authority on culture—putting their self in some perceived harm's way to make sure they "save" an aspect of another's culture, or "revitalize" something perceived as dying. This is disturbing first because it assumes that folklore is—to its scholars or practitioners—something essential, or that is born into an individual; it is unable to be fully learned. Second, this interpretation also seems to leave out the possibility of evolution of tradition – it places folklore as something of the past alone, and not constantly reinvigorated and changing within its own community. Cultural communities are positioned, in this vision, as needing an expert—a (white) hero folklorist—to come and save something for them.

Conversations I had with others at the AWSF meeting following this session assuaged my fears about the field somewhat; the views expressed by the folklorists quoted above are not held by all, by any means. But I got the sense in that room that many agreed with the audience members' statements at least in part. Such views disallow growth in the field, and keep the field from truly engaging with communities, leading to a lack of full and respectful representation and interpretation of community members' views, beliefs, and actions. Real community engagement and involvement seem unlikely when essentialism is at the core of a folklorist's practice. Instead, such a colonialist

mindset harkens back to the early- and mid-20th century, and a history both folklore and anthropology need to continue to work to demonstrate does not—or at least should not—persist.

Discussion

I went to the 2017 AWSF meeting in Eugene with the intention of learning more about the field of folklore in the Northwest, and to glean advice as I build Washington's new state folklife program. What I found was concern for the future of folklore, and concerning division among folklorists regarding what this future should look like. However, I also gained valuable practical advice and experienced intriguing examples of public folklore presentation. Importantly, I also developed relationships with fellow attendees, many of whom share the same concerns about the field that I do. So this experience awoke a desire in me to engage more with the field, to develop and nurture strong partnerships in the field, and importantly to engage and collaborate with community members I study, whom I hope to come to understand and represent. Though this was a brief experience and I did not myself present, I left with practical knowledge in my pocket, and the drive to do more, and do good. As such, I thank the Oregon Folklife Network for the tremendous amount of work it took to organize and pull off this thought-provoking meeting, and the American Folklore Society for providing funding to me, to be able to attend.